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Contents

DUMBARTON OAKS PAPERS

VOLUME 78, 2024

HENRY MAGUIRE

Robert G. Ousterhout (1950–2023) 1

JACK J. LENNON AND NICHOLAS WILSHERE

The Role of Pollution in Agathias's *Histories* 7

PAUL ULISHNEY

New Evidence for Conversion to Islam in Anastasius of Sinai's *Hodegos* 29

EDWARD HOPTIONCANN

Revolution in Byzantine Orthopedics:

New Operations for the Treatment of Fractures in the *Pragmateia* of Paul of Aegina 49

YANNIS STOURAITIS

Whose War Ethic? Dominant versus Subaltern Ideas about Just War in Byzantine Society 81

DAVID F. WAGSCHAL

The Old Gloss on the *Nomocanon in Fourteen Titles*: Introduction and Edition 105

JUSTIN A. MANN

Reimagining Hosios Loukas: The Monastery as Landscape 143

MARKA TOMIĆ

Martyrdoms of the Apostles of Hagia Sophia at Ohrid:

The Painted Cycle in the *Pareklētion* above the Diaconicon 189

DOROTA ZAPRZALSKA

Composite Icons of Cyprus 237

JUSTIN WILLSON AND DAVID JENKINS

Theophanes of Nicaea and the Diagram That Draws and Erases Itself 265

ANTHONY ELLIS
A Neo-Pagan Editor in Late Byzantine Sparta:
Or, How Gemistos Pletho Rewrote His Herodotus 315

SAMET BUDAK
Teaching Greek, Studying Philosophy, and Discovering Ancient Greek Knowledge
at the Ottoman Court in the Fifteenth Century 355



The Byzantine Portrait
PERSONHOOD AND REPRESENTATION
DUMBARTON OAKS SYMPOSIUM, 19–20 APRIL 2024 397

Abbreviations 399



Robert G. Ousterhout, pictured in the early 2010s with remains of the Church of St. Polyuktos.

Robert G. Ousterhout

1950–2023

HENRY MAGUIRE

Robert Ousterhout died at his home in Philadelphia on 23 April 2023. With his passing, the world of scholarship lost one of the leading exponents of the architecture of Byzantium and its neighbors. His influence was profound and will be long-lasting. There are few people engaged with or interested in the field today who have not been touched personally by his generosity and support or academically through his knowledge, his teaching, and his publications.

After schooling and undergraduate study in the state of Oregon, where he was born in 1950, Ousterhout took a master's degree in art history at the University of Cincinnati, working with George Stricevic, before enrolling in the doctoral program at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. There he acquired as his mentor Slobodan Ćurčić, who was to become the foremost historian of Byzantine architecture working in America, and who himself had been trained by the renowned architectural historian Richard Krautheimer at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York City. Krautheimer taught an approach toward buildings that was in many respects formalist, tending to disengage buildings from their social and geographical contexts. In the course of his career, Ousterhout broke away from this method, setting Byzantine architecture more firmly in its environments by examining such factors as settlement patterns and local building practices.

After receiving his doctorate in 1982, Ousterhout returned briefly to his home state to teach at the University of Oregon at Eugene, before going back to the

School of Architecture at the University of Illinois to replace Ćurčić, who had just departed to Princeton. He spent the next twenty-four years at Illinois, the major part of his career, rising through the ranks from assistant to full professor and twice serving as chair of the Program for Architectural History and Preservation. The university encouraged research by providing time, generous funding, and, above all, a library that was outstanding in its Byzantine holdings. At Illinois, Ousterhout was largely instrumental in instituting a Byzantine program that, while it never achieved official recognition, was responsible for a host of conferences and colloquia as well as four volumes of collected papers in the series *Illinois Byzantine Studies*, two of which he edited.¹ He was generous to an extreme, opening his house and table in Champaign to students and colleagues. He hosted a series of students and scholars from Serbia, Greece, and Turkey at his home, sometimes for several months, so that they, and in several instances their families, could have a place to stay while they pursued their projects in the university's libraries. He also began to attract doctoral students to work with him from the United States as well as from Greece and Turkey.

In 2006, Ousterhout moved to the Department of the History of Art at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where he replaced Cecil Lee Stiker,

1 *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, *Illinois Byzantine Studies* 1 (Chicago, 1990); with L. Brubaker, *The Sacred Image East and West*, *Illinois Byzantine Studies* 4 (Chicago, 1995).

another well-known specialist in Byzantine architecture, who had recently retired. His appointment at the University of Pennsylvania ushered in the last and most productive stage of his career. He supervised more than twenty doctoral students, he authored four major books, edited or co-edited a dozen others, and he curated or co-curated three exhibitions in Philadelphia and Istanbul, all while carrying out his administrative duties at the university. Due to the increasing encroachment of his final illness on his time and energy, he retired from teaching at the university in 2017, but he continued to work without respite until the end.

Throughout his career Ousterhout benefited from the hospitality and resources of Dumbarton Oaks, and he gave back to the institution generously in return with his own service and advocacy. He wrote his doctoral thesis there as a junior fellow in 1980–1981, drawing heavily on the collection of archival materials and photographs held in the basement, especially the drawings prepared by the Byzantine Institute of America, and benefiting from consultations with Robert Van Nice. Subsequently he held two more fellowships in 1983 and 2012–2013 before finally joining the Board of Senior Fellows in 2012, where he served a further six years. He also played essential roles in the organization of two symposia for the Byzantine program. The first, on “Constantinople: The Fabric of the City,” took place in the spring of 1998; several of its papers were published in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* in 2000 and again in Turkish translation in 2016.² The second symposium was devoted to the architecture and legacy of the lost church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. This conference, held in 2015, revisited a collaborative project that had been conducted in the early days of Dumbarton Oaks, which became the subject of a preceding symposium in 1948. Ousterhout’s contribution to the meeting of 2015, which updated the original research in light of more recent scholarly concerns and approaches, was to a great extent inspired by his former experiences of working in the archives at Dumbarton Oaks while he was preparing his thesis on the Kariye Camii, and also by his more recent interest in Istanbul and its transition from a Byzantine to an Ottoman city.

In addition to his work at home in American university departments and libraries, Ousterhout was an indefatigable traveler abroad, especially in Greece and Turkey, where he was involved in important archaeological research and conservation as well as in teaching. His first experience of archaeology in Greece followed on a visit by Charalambos and Demetra Bakirtzis to Urbana in 1984–1985, when they spent a year at the university under the auspices of the Center for Advanced Studies. Their stay was reciprocated in the following academic year when Ousterhout was a visiting scholar at the Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities at Kavala, where Charalambos Bakirtzis at that time was serving as ephor. That exchange began a long and fruitful collaboration. A notable consequence was Ousterhout’s participation in many activities of the ephoreia, including the restoration of a Late Byzantine funerary chapel at Didymoteicho in Thrace, carried out under the auspices of the 12th Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities for Eastern Macedonia and Thrace between 1990 and 1992. Among the surprising finds, which Ousterhout later published,³ were frescoes portraying enthroned figures of emperors equipped with wings, which were preserved in the niches lining the walls. This discovery showed that such imagery of feathered rulers, hitherto only known from the high-flown rhetoric of court orators and a few copper coins, also found expression in monumental painting.

From the mid-nineties, Ousterhout was to become increasingly involved in projects in Turkey. For almost twenty years during the summers he rented a house in the old city of Istanbul, near the ruins of the Byzantine imperial palace. From this base he would carry out his work and also entertain a constant stream of guests. He would guide visitors around the modern city for a week or more, pointing out a fragment of recessed brickwork here, a scrap of Byzantine retaining wall there, a ruined arch, or some other topographical feature that linked the location to a once-famous locale known from the texts. With his help, it was possible for his companions to strip away the distractions of modern Istanbul and to visualize the surroundings as if they were still in Constantinople. Many of Ousterhout’s colleagues will have tales of having their own work enlightened by his

2 *DOP* 54 (2000): 157–264; *Konstantinopolis: Şehrin dokusu* (Istanbul, 2016).

3 “A Late Byzantine Chapel at Didymoteicho and Its Frescoes,” *Milion* 5 (1999): 195–207.

erudition and his amazing knowledge of the physical remains of Byzantium in both the city and its provinces.

It was during this period in Istanbul that Ousterhout participated in the survey and restoration of the Zeyrek Camii in Istanbul, formerly the Pantokrator Monastery, the most important monument to have survived from Middle Byzantine Constantinople. He proved to be an effective fundraiser and was able to help finance two campaigns of work, from 1995 to 1998 and from 2001 to 2006. Together with Zeynep and Metin Ahunbay, who supervised the work on-site and coauthored the publication,⁴ he was largely responsible for rescuing the building from its former state of neglect. Ousterhout established close connections with colleagues and students in Turkey, especially through his work with ANAMED (the Koç University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations), located in Beyoğlu, Istanbul. Here he served on the advisory board and participated in many conferences. Most importantly, together with Tolga Uyar he ran the center's summer program, "Cappadocia in Context." This course attracted a talented group of young Byzantinists from a variety of countries, including Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Turkey, and the United States, several of whom went on to make their names in the field. It provided participants with an immersive experience of the lived-in landscape of Cappadocia, giving them the tools to interpret the environment in order to better understand its material culture. To carry on his legacy, the program will continue to be run by ANAMED under the name "Robert Ousterhout: Cappadocia in Context." Ousterhout also gave his time and support to a number of other cultural institutions in Istanbul, including GABAM (the Sevgi Gönül Byzantine Studies Center), ARIT (the American Research Institute in Turkey), the Istanbul Research Institute, and the Pera Museum, where he helped to curate three exhibitions.

Ousterhout's career as an academic writer broadly paralleled his active life, proceeding from an emphasis on formal analysis to a concern with environments and contexts. His first major book, which came out in 1987, was the publication of his doctoral thesis on

the architecture of the Kariye Camii in Istanbul which he had submitted at the University of Illinois in 1982.⁵ Previous writers had focused on the famous mosaics and frescoes in this church, thus plucking the roses, as it was imagined, from the bush. But Ousterhout examined the building itself, showing it to be an outstanding example of the Palaiologan aesthetic and revealing the intimate relationship between the building and its gleaming decoration. He highlighted the distinctive "mannerism" of the Late Byzantine structure, characterized by irregular planning and patterned brickwork, and showed that its highly refined and idiosyncratic version of the vocabulary of Byzantine architecture had its counterpart in the much admired mosaics and frescoes inside the church.

The opportunities that Ousterhout found in Greece and Turkey to study a large number of Byzantine buildings at close hand, and in some cases to participate in their conservation, encouraged him to supplement consideration of their formal characteristics with a closer attention to the methods and materials of their production. He considered the role of masons as opposed to formally trained architects, thus becoming more interested in the practical aspects of making and erecting buildings than in tracking the abstract progression of plans and shapes that had preoccupied many scholars of earlier generations. In a paper delivered at "Constantinople: The Fabric of the City," he reviewed various methodologies for contextualizing the later churches of Constantinople. For his final methodology, he chose "construction," which he defined as "a close examination of construction techniques" in the belief that "design and construction were part of the same process." Here he took as his example the Pantokrator Monastery, which he characterized as "completely irregular in its final form" as the result of a "continuous process of expansion and modification."⁶ The culmination of Ousterhout's interest in construction was his book *Master Builders of Byzantium*, published by Princeton University Press in 1999. This widely read work was produced in a second paperback edition⁷ as well as in Turkish translation.⁸ It focused on

4 R. Ousterhout, Z. Ahunbay, and M. Ahunbay, "Study and Restoration of the Zeyrek Camii in Istanbul: First Report, 1997–1998," *DOP* 54 (2000): 265–70; R. Ousterhout, Z. Ahunbay, and M. Ahunbay, "Study and Restoration of the Zeyrek Camii in Istanbul: Second Report, 2001–2005," *DOP* 63 (2009): 235–56.

5 *The Architecture of the Kariye Camii in Istanbul* (Washington, DC, 1987).

6 "Contextualizing the Later Churches of Constantinople: Suggested Methodologies and a Few Examples," *DOP* 54 (2000): 241–50.

7 *Master Builders of Byzantium* (Philadelphia, 2008).

8 *Bizans'ın yapı ustaları* (Istanbul, 2016).

masons, delving into such questions as: What materials did they use? How did they source them? How did they construct foundations, walls, arches, and vaults? And how did they decorate the resulting structures both inside and outside? In an important final chapter devoted to interior decoration in marble, fresco, and mosaic, Ousterhout discussed the close symbiotic relationship between builder and artist as they adjusted their designs to each suit the other. He concluded that in Byzantium, at least, “it becomes impossible to discuss the art in isolation because architecture and decoration work together to enhance the expressive potential of the building.”⁹ He also argued that after iconoclasm, the architect trained in theory was replaced by the master mason, who was trained on the job through participation in a workshop. The absence of theory brought a corresponding lack of status to the creator, however important the commission. The author himself, who often was more concerned with the study of material evidence than with theoretical ideas, may have been familiar with this situation.

Ousterhout’s interest in construction techniques enabled him to make major contributions to our understanding of the monuments of Jerusalem as well as to the architecture of the early Ottoman period. In an article entitled “Rebuilding the Temple: Constantine Monomachus and the Holy Sepulchre,” published in 1989, he disentangled the eleventh-century Byzantine phase of construction from the complex structure of the church.¹⁰ He was able to reconstruct the Byzantine plan by analyzing its surviving masonry, where he found the use of recessed brick technique characteristic of Constantinople and decorative brick patterns that had parallels in buildings of the capital. In another important article, published in 1995, Ousterhout used his knowledge of materials and workshop procedures to argue against an approach, fashionable at the time, that saw public architecture solely as an expression of power.¹¹ In this case, he addressed the question of how one should interpret the Byzantine elements in early Ottoman buildings. What was the message of their Byzantine appearance? Discussing such features

as the incorporation of spolia, recessed brick masonry, “indented heart” motifs, and other decorative detailing in brickwork, he asked whether they were expressive of domination or rivalry on the part of the new rulers, or whether, on the contrary, they merely showed the continuity of workshop practices from the Byzantine into the Ottoman period. He concluded that “Byzantine elements were appropriated in the new architecture precisely because the Byzantines were an integral part of the emerging Ottoman state,”¹² thus doubting whether any symbolic meaning was intended.

In the last phase of Ousterhout’s scholarly production, he turned from a close analysis of the aesthetics and construction processes of architecture to a consideration of its environments, especially in Cappadocia. Several factors may have influenced this change in his perspective. One of these was his interaction with the Pre-Columbian specialists at Dumbarton Oaks, who had to interpret the material culture of societies that were, for the most part, without decipherable texts, as was also the case in medieval Cappadocia. Another influence was his experience working with the archaeological service in northern Greece, which must have encouraged him to consider Byzantine buildings in the overall environmental context in which they had been produced, so that he acquired a more archaeological and anthropological perspective than heretofore. The last, but not the least, of the factors that inclined him toward a more archaeological approach was the encouraging presence and support of his husband, the archaeologist Brian Rose. An early piece of evidence for the shift in Ousterhout’s direction was the research that he published together with Charalambos Bakirtzis in Thessaloniki in 2007 as a book on *The Byzantine Monuments of the Euros/Meriç River Valley*. This study systematically described the architectural remains on each side of the Euros River, which currently forms the boundary between Greek and Turkish Thrace, an area that in Byzantine times was a vital part of the hinterland of Constantinople. For the first time, the book combined the Byzantine buildings on each side of the present border into a coherent account that set their architecture firmly into their original historical and geographical context.

Meanwhile, Ousterhout had been working in Cappadocia, where in 1994 he began the first of four

9 *Master Builders*, 253.

10 “Rebuilding the Temple: Constantine Monomachus and the Holy Sepulchre,” *JSAH* 48 (1989): 66–78.

11 “Ethnic Identity and Cultural Appropriation in Early Ottoman Architecture,” *Muqarnas* 12 (1995): 48–62.

12 “Ethnic Identity,” 60.

campaigns to document the church and site at Çanlı Kilise, which he published in the *Dumbarton Oaks Studies* series in 2005.¹³ Here, for the first time, a single Cappadocian site had been surveyed in its entirety in a project of landscape archaeology, including the masonry-built church, its paintings, and the surrounding settlement. His most revolutionary conclusion was that the settlement associated with the church was a village containing large houses, rather than a monastic complex, as previous investigators had assumed. In his preface to the second edition of the publication, he stated, “Certainly more needs to be done to situate Cappadocian communities within their geographical and topographical contexts.”¹⁴ Several scholars followed Ousterhout’s lead in studying the paintings and architecture of Cappadocia in relation to their environments, and he himself rose to the challenge in his subsequent book *Visualizing Community: Art, Material Culture, and Settlement in Byzantine Cappadocia*, which he published in Washington, DC, in 2017, also in *Dumbarton Oaks Studies*. In this lavishly illustrated volume, to use his own words, Ousterhout built upon and refined the ideas and methodologies first proposed in his book on Çanlı Kilise, using both his own recent research and that of others to cover the whole region of Cappadocia, an area rich in its material remains, although very poor in its textual record apart from a few inscriptions on the monuments themselves. The book surveyed a multitude of churches and chapels together with their painted and carved decoration, as well as monasteries, houses, waterworks, and agricultural installations, including winepresses, mills, apiaries, dovecotes, and stables. In the absence of written texts, he wrote a new kind of history, one that combined art, architecture, religion, society, and topography into an integrated picture that convincingly conveyed the multifaceted physical and spiritual lives of the region’s

inhabitants. Material culture became his text, and he read it with extraordinary care. The book is not only an invaluable source of reference for the monuments of Cappadocia, but also a brilliant demonstration of the methodology that he had pioneered.

Not satisfied with this achievement, Ousterhout, despite increasing problems with his health, produced another major book two years later, a much acclaimed survey of the whole span of the architecture of Byzantium and its periphery, ranging chronologically from its origins in Late Antiquity to its post-Byzantine legacy in the Ottoman Empire and Russia, and geographically from Djemila to Jerusalem and from Hermopolis to Pskov.¹⁵ The volume was published in the *Onassis Series in Hellenic Culture* and was awarded the Haskins Medal by the Medieval Academy of America in 2021. Here, in a text running to 750 pages, Ousterhout incorporated many of the themes of his earlier scholarship to create a multifaceted synthesis. He gave due emphasis to process, including the methods and materials employed by the builders as well as the usage and functions of their creations, and especially responses to changes in patronage, habitation patterns, and liturgy. He also discussed the interrelationships between the architectures of Byzantium and those of neighboring cultures as well as the additive nature of some later Byzantine monuments, such as the Pantokrator Monastery in Constantinople and the irregular “manneristic” aesthetic found in subsequent Palaiologan architecture.

Despite the range and complexity of its topic, the text of the book is characterized by clarity of thought and exposition, an availability to the reader that overlies originality of thought combined with a huge depth of knowledge and breadth of experience. The book, in its wealth of content and generosity of access, remains a fitting memorial for one who has taught so many how to learn from the material remains of the past.

13 *A Byzantine Settlement in Cappadocia*, *Dumbarton Oaks Studies* 42 (Washington, DC, 2005), with a revised paperback edition in 2011.

14 *Byzantine Settlement*, 1–2.

15 *Eastern Medieval Architecture: The Building Traditions of Byzantium and Neighboring Lands* (New York, 2019).

